The relationship of school climate, teacher defending and friends on students' perceptions of bullying in high school

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\section*{A B S T R A C T}

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of school climate, teacher defending, and friends on bullying and victimization. Participants were 2273 high school students from 3 public schools (an all girls, all boys boarding, and a co-ed day) in Kenya. A structural equation model was used to examine relationships between school climate, teacher behavior toward bullying, and student demographic characteristics, and bullying. Results revealed that a positive school climate was associated with less bullying behavior and victimization. In addition, when students reported that teachers stop bullying by students, bullying behavior and victimization scores were lower. Contrary to previous research these results showed that residents of a boys only boarding school were less likely to report bullying behavior than residents of an all girls school, or students at a co-educational institution. Furthermore, there were no differences in bullying behavior or victimization by gender or grade level. Implications of these results are discussed.

\section*{1. Introduction}

Bullying is the most common form of youth aggression and is characterized by an ongoing physically, socially, or verbally abusive relationship. Bullying affects a significant number of children in schools around the world. Children who are overtly assaulted physically or taunted verbally are said to be victims of a direct form of bullying, while those who are ostracized can be considered victims of indirect bullying (Olweus, 1994). The literature implies that around 30\% of adolescents have encountered at least a moderate level of bullying—as the bully and/or the target (Nansel et al., 2001). Physical/verbal hostility, verbal tormenting, gos-siping, social outcasting and exclusion all fall within the realm of bullying and this paper will specifically analyze the social, verbal, and physical dimensions of both bullying and victimization and how these are related to school climate, teacher defending and peer friendships.

Bullying interactions tend to be linked to a host of conduct, affect and physical acclimation issues. For example, adolescent bullying offenders usually demonstrate insolence, lawlessness, inadequate academic achievement, and elevated school drop-out rates (Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Nansel, Haynie, & Simons-morton, 2003, 2004). Alternatively, targets of bullying tend to suffer with depression, poor self-esteem, anxiety, detachment, inadequate academic achievement, suicidal ideation and even suicidal attempts (Fisher et al., 2012; Lemstra, Nielsen, Rogers, Thompson, & Moraros, 2012; Nansel et al., 2004). There is evidence that the outcomes for bullies and bullies who are also the victims of bullying can be quite different. Research has shown that those who only engage in bullying, but are not themselves the victims of bullying tend not to have long-term problems at a rate higher than those in the general
population, whereas individuals who are bullies, and who are also bullied are more likely to suffer long term negative outcomes, such as those described above (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Wolke, Copeland, Angold, & Costello, 2013). Finally, research reveals that strong, supportive friendships and a positive school climate are linked to fewer instances of both inflicting and sustaining bullying (Kendrick, Jutengren, & Statin, 2012). Adolescents who are bullied report more loneliness and difficulty making friends (Nansel et al., 2001). Students who establish friendships with peers report low levels of bullying and victimization (Kendrick et al., 2012). Whereas research indicates that school climate and friends have an influence on bullying, these studies have been largely conducted in the USA and Europe. This study therefore will investigate if having more friends and a positive school climate are predictors of less bullying and victimization in Kenya.

### 1.1. School climate and bullying behavior

The school environment is related to bullying, considering that a good portion of perpetrators and their targets coexist in a classroom. Students' perceptions of the school climate influence their relationship with the teachers and peers, which then influences bullying (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004). Specifically, schools with high disciplinary structure, or strict but fair rules and enforcement, high student involvement and teacher support tend to have students who enjoy learning (Cornell, Shukla, & Konold, 2015).

Studies conducted in the US show that school climate and bullying vary according to ethnicity, gender and grade level, suggesting a possibility of contextual differences in school climate and bullying (Connell, El Sayed, Gonzalez & Schell-Busey, 2015; Seals & Young, 2003; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Cornell and colleagues' study (2015) examining peer victimization and authoritative school climate among middle schoolers found that high scores on school climate were significantly associated with lower peer victimization. Also, high disciplinary structure in schools or strict but fair rules and enforcement, in addition to high teacher support were related to lower peer victimization. These results suggest authoritative school climate is an important component to peer victimization. Another study conducted in the US exploring the moderating effects of school climate on bullying prevention efforts showed that a positive school climate was related to a larger drop in student victimization. A similar study conducted by Nickerson, Singleton, Schnurr, and Collen (2014) examining middle school students' perceptions of school climate as a function of bullying involvement found that bullies and bully victims reported the most consistent negative perceptions of school climate. However, most of these studies have been conducted in middle schools. It is important to also examine school climate and bullying in high schools.

### 1.2. School climate and bullying in Kenya/Africa

Although several studies have examined relationships between school climate and bullying in the U.S., there is a gap in the literature specific to such relationships in Kenya. Regarding the larger context of Africa, school climate has been implicated as a potential moderator of traumatic stress reactions after experiences with community violence (O'Donnell, Roberts, & Schwab-Stone, 2011). O'Donnell and colleagues (2011) found that positive school climate buffered traumatic stress reactions in adolescents who witnessed violence in The Republic of the Gambia, especially at high levels; however, for adolescents who were victimized, buffering effects of positive school climate were strongest at lower levels of victimization. Smit's (2015) study regarding South Africa notes the overlap between general bullying behavior in the physical world, and cyberbullying, and the potential impacts of this overlap on school climate. As children are increasingly exposed to more advanced forms of communication, bullying experiences that happen "outside" the school can bleed into the school environment, potentially deteriorating school climate as fear of victimization rises. Studies from the Free State in South Africa (de Wet, 2006, 2013) and from Kenya (Macharia, 2016) investigated school climate less directly, but have important implications for understating the relationship between school climate and bullying. These studies showed that when teachers engage in dominating, authoritarian, or cruel teaching or disciplinary practices, or when they experience workplace bullying themselves, the results can be severely detrimental to school climates. In such situations, bullying behaviors are modeled for students, thereby potentially increasing risk for student bullying and victimization (de Wet, 2006, 2013). A recent study revealed moderate to high prevalence rates of bullying in Kenyan schools, but high self-efficacy for controlling bullying, as reported by teachers (Macharia, 2016). Furthermore, most teachers attributed bullying behaviors to students' personality factors—mostly indiscipline—rather than to external or school factors. These findings, combined with the gap in literature specific to school climate and bullying in Kenya, highlight the importance of the current study's aims.

### 1.3. Type of school and bullying

The prevalence of bullying differs based on whether a school is boarding or day, single sex or mixed (Alex-Hart, Okagua, & Opara, 2015; Lester, Mander, & Cross, 2015). Alex-Hart and colleagues' study (2015) in Nigeria exploring bullying prevalence in secondary schools found bullying was highest in all boys' schools, and lowest in mixed sex schools. A similar study done in Australia among 7th, 8th and 9th graders showed students who were classified as boarders experienced more bullying compared to those who attended school only during the day. Similarly, boarders were more likely to be the perpetrator of bullying and to be both perpetrator and victim. In Zimbabwe, a study examining determinants of bullying among urban high school students showed bullying was more prevalent in boarding schools compared to day schools (Ncube, 2013).

Another study done in Germany assessing bullying in boarding schools revealed higher rates of bullying in boarding schools when compared to adolescents who lived at home (Pfeiffer & Pinquart, 2014). However, studies conducted in Kenya regarding bullying and type of school have produced mixed results. One study showed similar results to previous studies suggesting more bullying in
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